

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 853

CS 506 465

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TITLE Meaning as a Therapeutic Variable.
PUB DATE Aug 88
NOTE 10p.; Revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (96th, Atlanta, GA, August 12-16, 1988).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Clinical Psychology; *Counseling Theories; *Developmental Psychology; Educational Psychology; Helping Relationship; Higher Education; *Psychotherapy; *Therapists
IDENTIFIERS *Social Therapy

ABSTRACT

While established approaches to therapy help the individual adapt to an essentially fixed world, Social Therapy (a 15-year-old clinical, educational, and developmental psychology practiced in clinics and private practices in New York, Boston, and other cities, with applications to crisis, the epidemic of abuse, and educational failure) seeks to adapt people to history as the totality of human existence. In Social Therapy, the patient is the client, along with the world, and the relationship between them; the task is to help produce changes in this relationship. It is an investigation of the relationship between the production of emotions and the production of the language used to talk about emotions, as they interrelate within the total environment of the interrelationship of productive histories. (SR)

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MEANING AS A THERAPEUTIC VARIABLE

Revised presentation of talk presented at the
American Psychological Association Convention
Atlanta, August 1988

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In their scathing polemic against the German philosophers, Marx and Engels admonished them for their idealistic view of language.

"Just as philosophers have given thought an individual existence so they had to make language into an independent realm. This is the secret of philosophers' language, in which thoughts in the form of words have their own content. The problem of descending from the world of thought to the actual world is turned into the problem of descending from language to life." (Marx and Engels, 1970)

In my opinion, contemporary psychologists and therapists suffer from the same problem. While psychotherapy--"the talking cure"--is extremely attentive to what people say and how they say it (especially in therapy), it pays remarkably little attention to the role that language plays in determining--indeed, as Marx and Engels said--in overdetermining how we think, feel, see and experience the world (including ourselves). While the specific language people use is taken by many schools of psychotherapy to be an important therapeutic variable, "linguaging" (how we came to talk the way we do; the origins of our language; the functions it serves psychologically, socially, politically, culturally; indeed, why we talk at all) is rarely dealt with as a therapeutic issue.

In other words, language, meaning, understanding--the host of meaning concepts--are viewed ahistorically. One focus of this discussion is that the way language has come to overdetermine how we think, feel, etc. is both an expression and perpetuation of alienation. Second, meaning has come to be overidentified with language, and this distortion also contributes to alienation and psychopathology.

Meaning is certainly a critical element of human development

(both normal and pathological). Following linguists and many philosophers, psychotherapists concerned with meaning in the therapeutic process associate it with language. To be sure, language has become the major way of constructing meanings over the course of human civilization. But what is lost from our consciousness, and our self-consciousness as analysts, is the history of this process. From Freud's time, therapists and analysts have recognized that people often do not mean what they say; the analysts look below the surface for the meaning, with the therapeutic process often taking the form of figuring out an alternative interpretation of the patient's words --and thus of her or his life. Those of the communicationist or systems school (Minuchin, Watzlawick, etc.) also recognize that there is another level of meaning. For them, however, it is above, not below, the actual language spoken, and a key component of their therapeutic process involves pointing out that there exists a meta-language and teaching people how to "meta-communicate." Yet in neither of these approaches is the meaning of meaning engaged, only particular meanings. Thus, while such therapies can be and often are helpful to people, we need to ask: How exactly do they help? What do they help people to do?

I believe that they help people adapt to society as it is. The client or patient in most therapeutic approaches is the individual in relation to an essentially fixed world. Now, if the only alternative to adapting people to society were non-adaptation, we might all--quite reasonably for pragmatic as well as ethical reasons--opt for adaptation for ourselves and our clients. Fortunately, that is not all there is. We can adapt to history, not

history as the written or actual past, but history as the totality of human existence. This distinction is key to Social Therapy, a 15 year old clinical, educational and developmental psychology that is practiced in clinics and private practices in New York, Boston, and other cities, post graduate training programs in New York and Boston, with applications to crisis, the epidemic of abuse and educational failure. Social Therapy takes human beings to be fundamentally producers of change, not objects to be changed, nor perceivers or knowers of the world or even participants in it. We believe that the elimination of mental illness and emotional pain lies in the human capacity to produce, organize, and reorganize our social practice. Adapting people to history is involving people in the collective activity of creating the necessary tools which reorganize our emotional and cognitive "apparatus" in ways that free us up to express our role as producers of the very conditions of our development--rather than being limited by the constraints on development (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia, individualism, etc.). Thus, in Social Therapy the world is as much a variable as the client. In fact, it is more accurate to say that in Social Therapy the true "patient" is the client, the world and the relationship between them. Our task is to help people produce changes in this relationship. Thus, Social Therapy is very concerned with productive processes.

How does this basic premise relate to the topic at hand--meaning as a therapeutic variable? For one thing, language has historically evolved into a powerful tool for resolving contradiction. Language, ideally thought to be patterned, logical, rational,

and rule-governed, has come to overdetermine how we think about thinking and how we conceptualize the world. Thus, not only is language understood to be rule-governed and logical, but so too is thought, the world, and the relationship among them--language, thought, and the world. In fact, however, these relationships are contradictory. "The effect of understanding language and thought in a way which divorces them from their social origins is to severely constrain and distort how we think and how we speak in such a way that understanding and expressing actual social conditions (contradictoriness) becomes exceedingly difficult" (Holzman and Newman, 1988, p.71).

For example, one contradiction of contemporary society is that to the extent that you say how it is you came to say what you are saying (e.g., the relationship between the productive history of how you feel and the productive history of how you express how you feel), people say you don't know how to talk! This contradiction is engaged in Social Therapy. We have no desire to adapt people to a culture and society where you are supposed to know how to say something other than what you mean.

No small part of the history of our species is how we have produced and organized the relationship between what is going on (in the world, for us, etc.) and our capacity to communicate what

is going on. Language is one of the primary tools we have produced for organizing this relationship. Many linguists, philosophers, and psychologists have puzzled over the seeming dilemma produced by one characteristic of the relationship between language and the world. Language--being static--cannot capture process. Thus, we are "doomed," many believe, to doing "alienated talking," by which we mean separating the product from the very process which produced it. The premise of the dilemma, however, is that language is a special product of human production, one that has the special function of capturing or mirroring or imitating social process, that it is not just another cultural artifact. But, why should language capture process?

We propose that the more scientifically interesting and psychologically more fruitful question is what is the relationship between the world and the language we use (See Holzman and Newman, 1988)? What is the relationship between the production of "things" and the production of language? The engagement of this question, we believe, is the means by which talking becomes dealienated. For example, just as we investigate the relationship between the production of pens and the production of paper, we need to investigate the relationship between the production of pens and the production of the language used to talk about pens. Within the area of science and technology, this relationship is relatively clear and useful; the relationship between the language of science and actual technology is fairly well understood and the gap between what occurs technologically and our capacity to communicate this is, for the most part, manageable. It is in the realm of social-psychological processes

that the gap is wide and the relationship poorly understood, especially (although by no means exclusively) when it comes to emotions and emotionality. Our language is well suited for technological development but poorly suited for emotional development. Most attempts to study how emotions are produced are insensitive to how the language of emotions is produced. To the extent that the relationship between emotions and the language of emotions is examined and understood at all, it is through the dominant scientific causal paradigm--a paradigm that distorts the actual relationship.

Social Therapy is an investigation of the relationship between the production of emotions and the production of the language used to talk about emotions, as they inter-relate within the total environment of the inter-relationship of productive histories. It is an attempt to close the (socially-determined) gap between what is going on and our capacity to express it.

Emotions--social in their origin and essence--are experienced and understood as divorced from their process of production. We deeply feel that our feelings are private and internal. "I feel angry"--"Why?" "Because my lover did such and such and that's how I feel when...." The resulting experience is not simply being located in the privacy of one's inner life, but of the impossibility of ever getting out.

In Social Therapy, we are concerned to unlock the individual from her or his prison of private emotionality and make one intensely aware of the social character of emotional reality. What is important to explore therapeutically is not so much why the person feels this or that or is saying this or that--i.e., figuring out what

they "really" mean, but finding out--exploring the active process of production of feeling this way, which includes the active process of the production of the relation between feeling this way and saying these words--"What do you mean, 'you're angry'? How come you're saying this? How come you're saying it to me? How come you're saying it now? How is all that you are saying and all that has happened seen to be productive of what you are calling 'anger'?"

This process of exploration is best understood as a building process rather than either a cognitive (interpretive) or emotional (sharing) activity. In order to seriously answer the question, "How are you?" one must be involved in the collective building of the environment which yields both the process and product of "how you are." The building of this environment is simultaneously the creation of emotions and the creation of new expressions of emotions; only through creating new modes of expression of emotionality can emotionality be transformed. Thus, the task of the social therapy group is to facilitate the building of an unalienated environment which allows for the reinitiation of emotional development--which is inseparable from the creation of language about emotionality.

Producing meaning then, is a social practice, in Vygotsky's terms, both tool and result, simultaneously the process and product of individual, societal, and historical development. Vygotsky noted that in the historical evolution of language the very structures of meaning and its psychological nature also change. The necessary conditions for understanding and meaning change as the world changes--both what are recognized as broad historical

and societal changes and the more mundane changes in people's everyday lives--their desires, needs, wants, values, etc. Often people come into therapy depressed, shocked, or in crisis by the sudden realization that they don't know themselves or what they want out of life or they don't know the person they have been living with for years. And it is often true! The conditions and demands for knowing someone (including oneself) have a history; they are different today from six months or two years or 20 years ago--and people too often have not done what they need to do to find out what these conditions are. They don't have the tools.

It is our belief that the reorganization of meaning, of semantic possibilities, of understanding from the current societal location of language as overdetermining can take place only through the reorganization of the environment--through the self-conscious collective activity of changing the conditions which produce the overdetermination in the first place, conditions which constrict possibility, social action, and human growth. This is what we mean by examining meaning as historical and it is but one way that history is the cure.

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